

Ferry Building  
Embarcadero at Market Street  
San Francisco, San Francisco County  
California

HABS No. CAL-1910

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction  
450 Golden Gate Avenue  
San Francisco, California

PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT  
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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FERRY BUILDING

San Francisco, San Francisco County, California

ADDRESS: Embarcadero at Market Street

OWNER: State of California

OCCUPANT: Various State Bureaus, The Port Authority of  
San Francisco, The World Trade Center

USE: Offices, Display Rooms, Entertainment Facilities,  
Museum; formerly a terminus for ferry boats.

HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

San Francisco's Ferry Building is a much loved landmark of the city. Its classicizing Baroque design, with a modified version of the upper part of Seville's Giralda tower crowning the center of the structure, accords well with the rather severe character of most public architecture in San Francisco. Commissioned in 1894, it was officially opened in 1898, but not entirely completed until 1903. The present building replaced a large wooden Union Depot and Ferry House which had been finished in 1877. Constructed of native Colusa sandstone over a steel and brick core, the Ferry Building stands on one hundred and eleven concrete piers joined into a platform approximately one hundred and sixty by six hundred and seventy feet. The building is virtually indestructible. It was hardly touched by the earthquake of 1906; and was spared from the fire that followed the 'quake. As the nerve center of ferry traffic serving transcontinental trains terminating at Oakland and local commuters from the East Bay, it saw as many as 50,000,000 persons in a single year at its heyday. Since the termination of ferry service, the building has been converted to State Offices and a World Trade Center.

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## HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Commercial wharves lined the eastern edge of San Francisco's harbor from its earliest years of growth after the Gold Rush. Much of the "land" was fill, extending the waterline farther and farther east. Ships tied up at the first wharves eventually became entirely landlocked, and served in various capacities. At the foot of Market Street, there had been a wharf since 1850.

By 1877 a high and rambling one-story wooden structure, essentially a series of sheds with unifying roof and a staged, central clock tower, replaced the area's wharves. This was the Union Depot and Ferry House. It had grown in piecemeal fashion; the first construction had been three ferry slips. Later sheds were built to shelter their "aprons".<sup>1</sup> The final estimated cost of this Depot and Ferry House was \$98,484. Two of the ferry slips were used by the Central Pacific; one was used by the South Pacific Coast Railway - all with connections to the East Bay, and points east and south. (The first overland trains arrived in Oakland in 1869, and passengers were ferried to San Francisco from that date to 1958, when the last of the Bay ferries went out of service. East Bay ferry-commuter service had terminated in 1939.) The Union Depot and Ferry House was a nerve-center for various transportation services, passenger and commercial. Steam, cable and horse-car connections linked the Depot with San Francisco's various sections, and with railroad lines operating to the north and south of the city. However, it rapidly proved to be inadequate for the developing city's relations with the west and the United States in general.

The Ferry Building was commissioned in 1894 from Architect A. Page Brown (born 1859; died January 20, 1896)<sup>2</sup>. Willis Polk planned an elaborate portico and peristyle for the building which was never constructed.<sup>3</sup> The building was begun about 1895. At Page Brown's death, Edward Swain continued the structure. (The cornerstone reads: "Erected A.D. 1896 by the Board of State Harbor Commissioners. E. L. Colnon, Pres't., D. T. Cole, F. S. Chadbourne, Commissioners. A. Page Brown, Architect. Edward R. Swain, Supervising Architect. Howard C. Holmes, Chief Engineer.") The Ferry Building was officially opened on July 13, 1898, but it was not completed until 1903.<sup>4</sup> The last stages of construction were under the supervision of Willis Polk, as Edward Swain moved to Hawaii, where he died in 1902. In the earthquake and fire of 1906, the building was virtually undamaged, although

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the great tower clock stopped at 5:12 A.M. (the time of the major quake). The clock hands remained at this time for about a year, until workmen returned the mechanism to its original order.

Among interesting historical features of the building was its siren, installed the day before Christmas, 1918 - whining thrice daily over the waterfront, and audible (on a clear day) in six counties.<sup>2</sup> Also of historic interest was the immense (six hundred feet long, eighteen feet high) panoramic map of California, at a scale of six inches to a mile, completed in 1925 and originally installed on the second floor (but recently removed altogether). Commuter service ceased during World War II<sup>3</sup>; and in 1956, the building was revised by William Merchant Associates (especially the north wing). Since 1956, various proposals have been made concerning the building - some to raze the wings and leave the tower as a monument in a new Ferry Park, others to integrate (and revise) the building with rapid transit termini at or near the present south end of the structure.

NOTES (Historical Information)

1. A section on "The Ferry Boats" by Carl I. Wheat in From Lands' End to the Ferry, part 13 (unpaginated) states that: "in 1877, A. E. Davis' narrow gauge South Pacific Coast Railway was completed between Santa Cruz and Alameda Point. The new line's gigantic ferry, the Newark...was for many years queen of San Francisco Bay...The earliest ferries had landed near the foot of Vallejo Street, but in 1875 a small building and ferry slips were erected on the site of the present Ferry Building." Gentry, San Francisco and the Bay Area, p. 169, discusses the history of ferry boats on the bay; the first regularly scheduled service was the steamer Kangaroo in 1850.
2. Withey, Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased), p. 79, Page Brown should not be confused with Arthur Brown, Jr.: Page Brown's death came accidentally at the early age of 37.
3. Drawing preserved at the Department of Architecture, University of California, Berkeley; it was published in Architect and Engineer later.
4. For the official opening in 1898, see the San Francisco Chronicle, July 14, 1898, where it was called the "new Union

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Ferry Depot". The ferry Piedmont discharged its first load of passengers at 12:15 PM to inaugurate the ferry service of the building. (Also, see O'Brien, "Riptides", San Francisco Chronicle, May 3, 1946.) The final estimated cost was \$1,105,000. In the Overland Monthly, February 1897, pp. 161-165, is an article by Charles S. Naylor which attempts to put the source of funds for the building on record. This asserts that State authorized bonds (November, 1892) for a proposed \$600,000 Ferry Building were not State paid (out of Taxation) but State credit (from wharfage and portage by ocean carriers using the building) - estimated to be approximately \$1,000,000 with interest. The bonds were to mature in nineteen years; the waterfront was already State owned. There are interesting sketches of the building from Market Street (by Victor Perard) and from the bay (by Charles Graham) in the Overland article, as well as a plan of the ground floor.

5. The siren replaced a time ball on the outside of the tower. Each noon the ball was tripped automatically to slide down a high pole. Originally it had been a golden ball, but ship captains complained that it was too reflective and too difficult to see. It was painted black and served more effectively to set ship chronometers until the siren replaced it.

6. Estimated at 50,000,000 persons a year, making the Ferry Building the busiest world traffic terminal next to Charing Cross Station in London. For a description of the various lines served, and their location in the building prior to 1939, see H. T. Purdy, San Francisco As It Was, etc., pp. 52-53. The principal lines involved were: Key Route, Santa Fe, Western Pacific, with termini north of the central tower; the Southern Pacific termini were south of the tower. Smaller lines such as the Sausalito and Tiburon ferries and Creek Route ferry were also in the building.

Also see Gentry, San Francisco and the Bay Area, p. 170: "The passage of a State law guaranteed investors in the spans (the new bay bridges) lifelong insurance against competition from water-borne conveyances. The only exceptions were the ferries maintained by the Southern Pacific Railroad, which were allowed to operate for railroad passengers between Oakland and San Francisco. (Two nearby lines, Richmond-San Rafael and Martinez-Benicia, remained in operation until the late 1950's, until bridges in the vicinity

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were completed.) Considered uneconomical, the last of the Southern Pacific Ferries, the San Leandro, made its final run on the night of July 30, 1958, packed with silent mourners." From Pearl Harbor to the end of World War II, the Navy occupied the building leaving only the Southern Pacific running a ferry for overland trains.

# SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL AND SOURCES

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- Baird, Joseph A. Jr., Time's Wondrous Changes: San Francisco Architecture, 1776-1915, San Francisco, California Historical Society, 1962, pp. 41, 47; plate 10.
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- Guilfoyle, Merlin J., San Francisco: No Mean City, Fresno, Academy Library Guild, 1954, pp. 127-131.
- Harlan, George H. and Fisher, Clement, Jr., Of Walking Beams and Paddle Wheels: A Chronicle of San Francisco Bay Ferryboats, San Francisco, Bay Books Limited, 1951, various citations.
- Kemble, John Haskell, San Francisco Bay: A Pictorial Maritime History, Cambridge (Maryland), Cornell Maritime Press, 1957, see index.
- Lewis, Oscar, San Francisco Since 1872, San Francisco, privately printed, 1946: photograph of "old" Ferry Building on p. 31 and of the "new" (ca. 1899), p. 48.
- O'Brien, Robert, This is San Francisco, New York, Whittlesey House, 1948, pp. 19-22.
- Potter, Elizabeth Gray, The San Francisco Skyline, New York, Dodd, Mead and Company, 1939, pp. 83, 84.
- Purdy, Helen Throop, San Francisco: As It Was, As It Is, and How To See It, San Francisco, Paul Elder, 1912, pp. 52, 53.
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Withey, H. F. and E. R., Biographical Dictionary of American Architects, Deceased, Los Angeles, New Age, 1956, p. 79 (A. Page Brown).

Woodbridge, John and Sally, Buildings of the Bay Area, New York, Grove Press, 1960, unpaginated (under Financial, Section 14SF).

W.P.A.: San Francisco, in American Guide Series, New York, Hastings House, 1947, pp. 268-270.

#### Interviews:

J. A. Baird with Mr. Don De Lone, Public Relations, San Francisco Port Authority.

#### Newspapers and Periodicals:

"Bonanza" section of San Francisco Chronicle, excerpted from Harold Gilliam and Phil Palmer's The Face of San Francisco. Overland Monthly, February, 1897, pp. 161-165 (article by Charles E. Naylor; sketch of building from Market Street by Victor Perard; plan of ground floor; view from bay, by Charles Graham).

San Francisco Chronicle, July 14, 1898.

San Francisco Chronicle, May 3, 1946 (O'Brien's "Riptides")

Wagon Wheels, November 1921, p. 2.

#### Reports:

HABS No. CAL-1888 - Southern Pacific Oakland Mole and Pier by A. Lewis Koue, FAIA, Architect, 1960.

### ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

#### EXTERIOR

The Ferry Building is approximately six hundred and sixty feet long, one hundred and fifty feet wide and three stories high. The lofty central tower is approximately two hundred and thirty five (some sources say two hundred and forty or forty five feet high.<sup>1</sup>) The tower is thirty two feet square and has a clock with dials that are twenty two feet in diameter, hands that are eleven feet long, and numerals that are three feet high. The building is set on a remarkably sound platform of concrete piers, one hundred and eleven in number - each sixteen feet by twenty eight feet at the base; the piers are joined by

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concrete arches into a single foundation unit approximately six hundred and seventy feet and one hundred and sixty feet. The principal structural materials are steel, concrete and brick. The exterior is faced with grayish Colusa sandstone, from the Knowles Quarry.<sup>2</sup> Much of the interior facing was originally marble.

The principal facade design is conceived in terms of repeated ground floor arches, with eighteen lofty arched windows rising through the second and third stories, at either side of a central parti combining a triumphal arch and tower. The two "wings" with their arches provide a late 19th century variant of the arch - preoccupations of Richardson, although here their proportions are less massive than in Chicago buildings. Dividing the great arched windows of the second and third stories are simple Tuscan pilasters of virtually pier-like size. Double string courses provide horizontal emphasis at the top of the first story and under the main building cornice. The window treatment in the southern "wing" is as it was - triple windows at the second story framed in the great pilasters, with light for the third story under the arches. The original intention for a mighty interior nave can be most clearly seen at the south end of the building, where the arch windows suggest the character of the interior space. At the north, William Merchant Associates modified the original window treatment with modern metal sash and glass. The central parti, which gives a Classical Baroque fillip to this otherwise sedate structure, consists of three lofty arches of equal height (rising to the same level as the second and third story arches of the "wings"), divided by giant Corinthian columns, and framed with two more Corinthian columns at either side. (This obviously relates to the ideas of McKim, a little later, for Union Station in Washington, D. C.) The tower is based very generally upon the so-called Giralda tower of Seville Cathedral, Spain. In certain respects it suggests, too, the later Tower of Jewels at the Fair of 1915, although it is not so encumbered with ornament as the Fair tower. A. Page Brown was obviously not making a copy of the Giralda tower (with its subtle and accidental combination of Islamic lower portion and 16th century top); his design is a conservative staged tower with repeated levels of Ionic and Tuscan columns, and an airy lantern at the apex. The triple vertical recesses of the tower only vaguely recall the Islamic ideas of the Giralda.



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## INTERIOR

The best recent description of the interior of the Ferry Building is in Benet, A Guide to San Francisco, pp. 117-118. Prior to 1939 (and the revisions of 1956), the best description can be found in Purdy, San Francisco As It Was, etc., pp. 52, 53. It seems only sensible to paraphrase this material, with a few minor changes. (The "grand nave" of the second floor was forty eight feet wide and forty two feet high - the full length of the building. This has, of course, been extensively modified to suit new purposes and tenants.)

Helen Purdy's 1912 resume of the Ferry Building's interior features is as close as one can get to the original building: "The arcaded front on the ground floor leads to the waiting rooms of the different ferry lines. (This is followed by a discussion of each line using the building.) There are also public telephone booths, telegraph and express offices, places for checking hand luggage, news, novelty, candy and flower stands. The baggage room of the Southern Pacific is at the extreme south of the building. Near by is a branch postoffice.

"On the second floor is a grand nave, the full length of the building. Here large receptions have been held, and flower shows of great beauty and interest. South and north of the main stairways, up another short flight, are the exhibits of the State Development Board and the State Mining Bureau...There are notable exhibitions of all the State products and extensive collections of minerals, relief maps, an information desk, bulletins, and other printed matter...Between the two stairways is the Ladies' Waiting Room.

"The offices of the Harbor Commissioners open from the grand nave, also those of the State Horticultural Commissioner and of the State Railroad Commissioners. From this floor are the entrances to the upper decks of the ferry boats."

Benet describes the building of the present: "Beneath the tower, just inside the arcade, is the office of the Harbor Police, a twenty-man force that patrols the waterfront for the Port Authority. The office faces the main stairway up and down which commuters once poured.

"Ascending, we are in a great nave (now cut up into two levels and with temporary partitions; the famous relief map was sold to a private buyer and removed). To the right are the offices of the San Francisco Port Authority, A State body established in 1863 to administer and operate the waterfront...It assumed its present name in 1957...

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"Eastward across the nave...is a remarkable mineral exhibition...of the State Division of Mines. (There is also a fine library, open to the public.)

"North of the main stairs a wooden stairway gives access to...offices, of the Division of Mines...the State Fish and Game Department, etc." The World Trade Center<sup>3</sup> is in the remodeled north wing of the building; Covarrubias' murals of the Pacific Basin are on the ramp wall here.

The present tenants number some sixty-odd; and the building's "fixed population" is over one thousand five hundred persons.

#### SITE

In addition to the concrete piles and foundation platform, it is important to note the related docks and seawalls north and south of the building - of which the Ferry Building is the focus. These are administered by the Port Authority; forty-three deepwater piers and eighteen and one-half miles of berthing space are available for world shipping. A Belt railroad with six diesel engines provides communications shipment facilities. A \$50,000,000 modernization program was initiated in 1961. The most discussed aspect of the site currently is the freeway arm which passes directly in front of the western face of the Ferry Building, cutting off its symbolic presence from Market Street and the City of San Francisco. Various schemes, ranging from demolition of the freeway to partial or whole demolition of the Ferry Building, have been proposed.

#### NOTES (Architectural Information)

1. The usual figure for the tower is 235 feet, but it ranges as high as 275 feet (which is probably a typographical error for 235 or 245). Dimensions of the building range from 659 by 156 to 661 by 150.
2. See Wagon Wheels, November, 1951, p. 2.
3. This consists of offices for various commercial firms and offices of certain Consuls (Denmark, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Indonesia, and the Philippines). The Marine Exchange has an office on the second floor. A handsome club-restaurant occupies space facing the waterfront.

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